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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [GY](#)
SUBJECT: GUYANA GENERAL ELECTIONS AUGUST 28: FINAL PREVIEW

REF: A. GEORGETOWN 838

[1](#)B. GEORGETOWN 833
[1](#)C. GEORGETOWN 828

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael D. Thomas
For reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Heading into the final weekend before Guyana's August 28 general elections, international observers have descended upon the capital in force. Two dozen Mission employees and contractors will participate as observers under the OAS' auspices. The ruling People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) is going all out in its bid to maintain an absolute majority in Parliament, which still looks vulnerable (ref B). Some campaign tactics -- particularly by the PPP/C -- have marred the final week. There have been no reports of election-related violence since the August 8 murders of five newspaper employees, but the mood in Georgetown remains apprehensive given the history of post-election unrest. END SUMMARY.

Election Nuts and Bolts

[1](#)2. (U) Guyanese go to the polls August 28 to elect their president and parties for the National Assembly. The GoG has declared August 28 a public holiday. Polls will open at 06:00 and lines to vote will close 18:00. Just under 2,000 polling stations will accommodate a controversial voters list of 499,369 names -- with a maximum of 450 electors per station. We expect nearer to 400,000 people will actually vote, as the list includes many who registered in the 1997 and 2001 elections but have since migrated and will not return to vote.

International Observers Shoulder Big Responsibility

[1](#)3. (SBU) Four organizations are providing approximately 160 international observers. This is a big shortfall compared to the 390 international observers that observed the 2001 election. The four observer groups are coordinating closely with one another, despite very different mandates and staffing.

¶4. (C) OAS: 124 observers, led by OAS A/SYG Albert Ramdin. The only group with sufficient numbers to cover the election comprehensively. Twenty-four U.S. mission employees and contractors are volunteering as observers under the OAS' auspices. Ramdin intends to stay in Guyana until September 12. He will then deliver his verbal report to the OAS September 6. Ramdin predicts this report may include admonishments about the need for electoral and constitutional reforms in Guyana, laying the groundwork for a Permanent Council declaration.

¶5. (C) The Carter Center: about 10 observers, led by Sir John Compton (former St. Lucia prime minister). The focus of the Carter Center's "presence" is on the pivotal post-election period rather than election observation of polling sites. Center officials have hinted that President Carter himself is prepared to make himself available if it looks like a breakthrough on governance reform can be clinched after the elections.

¶6. (SBU) Commonwealth: 18 observers, led by Ratu Epeli Nailatikau (former Fiji Islands deputy prime minister and speaker). A group of VIP observers with limited knowledge of Guyana -- unlikely to play a central post-election role.

¶7. (C) CARICOM: 10 observers, led by former Barbados Chief Elections Officer Hensley Robinson. A modest team, as in the past. CARICOM is still extremely reluctant to meddle in member states' internal politics, although Ramdin wants CARICOM to exert its influence more strongly in Guyana.

Low Blows on Campaign Trail Homestretch

¶8. (C) Two local television stations are refusing to air a political advertisement, "The Great Pretender", that warns viewers that People's National Congress/Reform (PNC/R) leader Robert Corbin and Alliance For Change (AFC) leader Raphael Trotman cannot be trusted. The attack ad -- not identified as a PPP/C production -- shows footage of a riot of Afro-Guyanese, presumably in Georgetown after the 2001 elections. Objective media experts agree that the ad is unnecessary and out of place, especially at this late stage of the campaign. Robert Persaud (President Jagdeo's chief spin doctor) is staunchly defending the ad and other questionable PPP/C media tactics.

¶9. (SBU) GoG authorities are searching the Linden area for the transmitter of a three-week old pirate radio station. The station is reportedly broadcasting music and political advertisements for the PNC/R. The PPP/C is crying foul -- Head of the Presidential Secretariat Roger Luncheon dispatched a letter of concern to Charge -- but the larger issue is the GoG's continued hold on its radio monopoly despite heavy national and external criticism.

¶10. (C) The Director of Public Prosecutions recommended August 22 that Justice For All Party (JFAP) presidential candidate C.N. Sharma be charged with indecent assault on a minor. Sharma, a popular muckraking journalist and TV station owner, is accused of indecently assaulting an 11-year-old girl in July. Sharma claims the move is nothing but an attempt by the PPP/C to besmirch his character just before the election. There is a history of similar such charges against Sharma, including at least one several years ago with some credibility. Many observers believe this latest charge is an election-related political attack.

¶11. (U) In a sophomoric twist to the campaign's final week, billboards advertising several parties including the PPP/C and PNC/R have been painted over or ripped down. All sides are denying responsibility and pinning blame on others.

Campaign Issues

¶12. (U) Unfortunately, the presidential candidates have not held any public debates. The parties have often resorted to mudslinging and name-calling. When they do turn to issues, crime/security and jobs are the main focus. The PPP/C's usual tactic is to compare statistics of how Guyana is faring now compared to pre-1992 during the PNC's 28-year reign. The opposition parties key on Guyana's economic stagnation, the PPP/C's corruption and its perceived ties to narco-criminality. This year's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) has actually been one of the more serious topics on the campaign trail. The PPP/C and PNC/R have both aired advertisements quoting extensive passages from the INCSR to support their respective positions.

What We'll be Looking For

¶13. (SBU) Post will follow two aspects of the election with particular interest: a) The level of organization at the polls and whether they close on time in an orderly fashion; and b) The transmission and announcement of results. Problems in these areas triggered unrest in Georgetown after prior elections.

¶14. (SBU) GECOM is capable of pulling off a smooth election day, but its internally fragmented structure and habit of last-minute planning does not inspire confidence. An indifferent voter education campaign has not helped matters. Rumor spreads much quicker than fact in Guyana -- if a disruptive rumor starts, it could make for a chaotic election day.

¶15. (SBU) GECOM requested US\$97,000 of donor funding August 22 for an elections media center. Communicating results quickly and accurately is vital to a successful election. In past elections, the process of announcing results has been confused, delayed, or simply incorrect -- a catalyst for post-election unrest and violence. The EU has stepped in to contribute 50,000 Euros (about US\$62,300) for this, which should be enough to make the media center happen at this late stage. USAID was prepared to assist as well, but would have required more bureaucratic due diligence of the bloated budget. Complicating matters further this time is AFC campaign manager Dick Morris' plan to hire Gallup to do an exit poll. Guyana has no history of an exit poll and a population famously unwilling to reveal its ballot choices -- we fear that Morris' numbers may not match the actual results.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The week leading up to elections has been surprisingly quiet. By local standards, if the worst conflict is about defacing billboards and controversial TV ads, then that is good news. However, neither we nor our Guyanese interlocutors are breathing easy yet -- that will come only after the official results are in and accepted by all parties. In a best-case scenario, that will occur by August 31. But in Guyanese elections, there is almost always a hitch. END COMMENT.
Thomas